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Miscarriages and Stillbirths Put Some Couples at Risk

By David Gibson

After a pregnancy ends in miscarriage or a stillbirth, a significant number of parents discover over time that their relationship as a couple also has suffered, according to a new study conducted at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor.

Dr. Katherine Gold, the study's chief researcher, said that "miscarriage and stillbirth can be powerful and traumatic events for families." A university press release commented that "because miscarriage affects 15 percent of pregnancies, and stillbirths happen in 1 percent of pregnancies, a substantial number of parents experience these losses."

Gold, a medical doctor, is assistant professor of family medicine and obstetrics and gynecology in the university's medical school. Though many couples during the period after a pregnancy loss "become closer," she said that for couples who were "struggling before the loss, this could be a huge stress for their relationship."

Other factors complicating a couple's relationship after a miscarriage or stillbirth include the differing ways men and women tend to cope with such a loss, the study proposed. "Men and women tend to grieve differently after pregnancy loss, and parents may find themselves in conflict over coping styles and other matters at an already-stressful time," it explained.

The study said that "parents with significantly different grieving patterns may be at particularly high risk for subsequent marital conflict or emotional withdrawal."

Gold told this Web site that it is natural to experience stress in a relationship after a loss. But she said the study "suggests that the ripple effect from pregnancy loss can be significant."

Furthermore, she said that "if a couple is struggling, it is vital that they feel comfortable asking for help, whether that comes from a therapist, counselor, physician or member of their church."

It is helpful, Gold said, "for friends, family and community members to understand that for many parents, miscarriages and stillbirths can be devastating and traumatic events, and the emotional impact may last for a long time after the loss, even if it isn't something the couple is talking about openly."

Those, like Gold, “who work with families can help by acknowledging the loss, discussing the different ways in which the mother and father may be feeling or managing their grief, and identifying which couples may need additional support,” she said.

A report on the study was published online April 5 by *Pediatrics*, a journal of the American Academy of Pediatrics. Women who experienced miscarriages or stillbirths “had a significantly greater hazard of their relationship ending, compared with women whose pregnancies ended in live births,” the report noted.

The report defined “miscarriage” as “the loss of a fetus before 20 weeks of gestation,” and “stillbirth” as the loss of the fetus “after 20 weeks but before birth.”

The researchers employed data from the National Survey of Family Growth to study married and cohabitating women who had a live birth, miscarriage or stillbirth. The study’s findings “present new information about risks to cohabiting couples,” the researchers observed. Yet, despite data showing that cohabiting couples are, in general, at greater risk of breaking up than married couples, the study found “that the relative increases in relationship dissolution rates after loss were very similar” for both groups.

Over a 15-year period, couples who miscarried had a 22 percent higher risk of experiencing a break-up than couples who had a live birth, while couples who experienced a stillbirth had a 40 percent higher risk of their relationship ending, the university said.

The study stressed that those who provide care for bereaved families need to be aware that “for some families, the stability of parental relationships may be at increased risk after loss, and they should consider whether selected parents would benefit from relationship support or counseling.”

The lasting effects of a pregnancy loss need to be recognized, the study urged. It said that while “most of the effect after miscarriages was seen in the first two or three years, the effect after stillbirths persisted for nearly a decade.”

Given the frequency of miscarriages, society needs to take seriously their potential impact on couples, the study said. It added that women who had a stillborn child were at “particularly high risk” of their relationships ending, “and this risk persisted for up to nine or 10 years.”

A stillbirth comes after a couple has had a rather long time to become attached to a child in the womb, the study suggested. It said:

“Although it is well recognized that parents form attachments very early after conception, later losses allow for an even longer period for attachment and therefore may cause more psychological trauma and a longer duration of psychological stress.”

For example, the study continued, “both mothers and fathers of stillborn children often have experienced the infant kicking and have heard fetal heart sounds,” potentially making “the infant and the anticipated birth more tangible to both parents.”